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## Plagiarism in the Contemporary Academia: Identity and Ethics

It would be difficult to consider the problem of plagiarism without entangling oneself into the web of relations that it forms with the structure of the institution of academia. The complexity of those relations surfaces when it is realised that plagiarism, broadly perceived as a breach of honest scholarship, infringes simultaneously upon several established and approved social orders. The internal rules of the most conspicuous of those orders, the judicial, the economic and the ethical, cannot accept plagiarism within their boundaries, discerning it respectively as criminal, unprofitable and immoral. The analysis of the question of plagiarism performed from those angles would almost certainly prove to be fruitless, at the risk of being obvious. However, the study of the actual guidelines for the proper conduct of a student or a scholar, which are published by almost every university, may point towards a direction quite different from the axiomatic presuppositions as to the reason for the apparent vice of plagiarism.

In order to illuminate the essence of this dilemma, it is not enough to perceive plagiarism as a mere disturbance of the orders or codes to which the academic structure answers and by which it functions, for those orders or codes are largely universal in the western society and may apply in case of almost every social phenomenon. Plagiarism must be regarded as a parasite burrowing into the very foundations of the academic construction. It is the task of the present paper to suggest certain dangers to the modern day academia and to demonstrate how the self-defence mechanism of the academia reacts to those dangers by issuing discursive practises which are directed at what may be considered as the identity of a scholar and which construct this identity upon moral and ethical basis.

The word “advancement” connotes the term “progress,” a notion which from the post-modern perspective is simply unacceptable. As Ihab Hassan writes, the post-modern period is characteristic of decanonisation which “applies to all canons, all conventions of authority. We are witnessing [...] a massive ‘delegitimation’ of the mastercodes in society, a desuetude of the metanarratives, favouring instead ‘*les petites histoires*’ [...]”. Thus from the ‘death of god’ to the ‘death of the author’ and ‘death of the father’, from the derision of authority to revision of the curriculum, we decanonise culture, demystify knowledge, deconstruct the languages of power, desire, deceit.”<sup>1</sup> This “incredulity towards metanarratives” applies to the narrative of Progress, the leading notion of the Enlightenment period. Reason, the ultimate instrument in the search for Truth, ensured the reciprocating progress of the human sciences. We recall the unshakeable belief in the human faculties in the words of Marquis de Condorcet, one of the leaders of the movement:

We have already seen reason lift her chains, shake herself free from some of them, and, all the time regaining strength, prepare for and advance the moment of her liberation. It remains for us to study the stage in which she finally succeeds in breaking these chains, and when, still compelled to drag their vestiges behind her, she frees herself from them, one by one; when at last she can go forward unhindered, and the only obstacles in her path are those that are inevitably renewed at every fresh advance because they are the necessary consequences of the very constitution of our understanding – of the connection, that is, between our means of discovering the truth and the resistance that it offers to our efforts.<sup>2</sup>

The current period of revision progresses (!) by the movements of reflection, duplication, reiteration. The structuralist bricolage does not produce – it only restructures. The poststructuralist critique affixes the “s” to the word “criticism” inviting potential analysis from many different perspectives. History is rewritten, literary works undergo the same process. In this light, the word “knowledge” becomes highly suspect and probably a concept easy to undermine. The current methodological trends, such as the critical pedagogy, for example, reflect the aforementioned attitude and are characterised by the belief in the relativism of knowledge and truth.

The Enlightenment notion of reason needs to be reformulated within a critical pedagogy. First, educators need to be sceptical regarding any notion of rea-

<sup>1</sup> Ihab Hassan, “Pluralism in Postmodern Perspective,” in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. T. Docherty (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 196.

<sup>2</sup> Marquis de Condorcet, “Sketch for an Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind,” in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: an Anthology*, ed. L. Cahoon (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), p. 73.

son that purports to reveal the truth by denying its own historical and ideological principles [...] This suggests that we reject claims to objectivity in favour of partial epistemologies that recognise the historical and socially constructed nature of their own knowledge claims and methodologies.<sup>3</sup>

The difficulty with the critique of meta-narratives lies in the persistent question whether such a critique is not a meta-narrative itself. The belief in the socially constructed knowledge is most certainly also a socially constructed belief, a fact which many post-modern critics conveniently chose to ignore. Regardless of this problem which calls for a separate discussion of its own, knowledge, nowadays, is sought in a relentless movement backwards; a re-examination rather than creation. The modern humanities move within the sphere of re-drafting. The words "creation" or "invention" are substituted with a term from a vocabulary of industry – "production." The production of meaning, the production of texts, the production of interpretation; an assembly line jargon heralds the era of re-production, the reality of simulacra and the copy without the original.

Stripped of the safe ideal of progress and reason, the humanities become much more susceptible to the dangers of self re-production. In a world-philosophy of the Enlightenment, plagiarism would be an offence against the very principles of the movement, yet paradoxically it would seem a far lesser danger than today. Two main reasons account for this fact. Firstly, the search for truth through the faculty of reason is a dynamic movement *forward*; plagiarised work as an encumbering repetition presents in such situation only a minor hindrance in the context of the drive of the epoch, which is strong enough to overcome momentary procrastination. Secondly, plagiarism and progress form a distinct dichotomy, a polarity where the first term is an obvious negation of the other. Within this opposition, the right and the wrong are implicitly defined and, in a certain sense, stand as axiomatic conclusions of this particular ideology. In such a predicament, plagiarising is not so much an offence against the community or an institution but a crime against the very ethos of the epoch. Ethical branding becomes therefore far easier and does not call for a specific set of rules or guidelines.

The so-called post-modern times are to a far greater extent open to the danger of plagiarism. The mood of relativism, represented to the extreme in the faction of the postmodernist "anything goes," eventuates in any firm ethos being, if not far weaker, than at least much more difficult to locate or ascertain. In the situation where diffusion, dispersion and finally decapitalization of truth and knowledge replace the forward movement under the banner of

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<sup>3</sup> Henry A. Giroux, "Towards a Postmodern Pedagogy," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: an Anthology*, ed. L. Cahoon (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), p. 693.

progress, there lurks the shadow of *angst* at the pitfall of self-duplication. The humanities become the area of compilation where creativity constitutes, as Michel de Certeau ironically points out “the act of reusing and recombining heterogeneous materials. Meaning is tied to the significance that comes from this new use. [...] Central here is the cultural act that is part and parcel of the “colage,” the invention of forms and combinations, and the procedures that allow such composite shapes to be multiplied. A technical act *par excellence*.”<sup>4</sup> The obsession of the academia with the referenced functions as a safe-guard against the possibility of stagnation. While it became unfashionable to speak of progress or advancement, there still remains the necessity of meaningful expansion in order for the academia to function. Without the concrete and focused Project and left instead with the prefix “re-,” contemporary scholarship is vulnerable to the virus of repetition or “the same.” It becomes thus vitally important to protect the “soundness” of research via strict university policies on plagiarism.

The problem is amplified through the fact that the academic structure does not undergo any radical metamorphosis. Even though the notions behind the current subjects of scholarship may be radically post-modern, the structure within which they are practised does not appear to correspond to the content. Apart from the phenomenon of “political correctness” and the modified attitude towards the so-called minorities, the system remains a system which must function, grow and, to use once again the industrial terminology, produce. Essays, thesis and articles must be created and originality is one of the prime requirement for their approval in the scholars’ community. Thus we are faced with a confrontation of silencing of philosophies based upon the notion of progress with the essential demand for originality and uniqueness.

In such light, the act of plagiarising in its strictest, literal sense stalls and inhibits the process of expansion. In the Baudrillardian era of hyperreality and above all of dis-chronic re-production and repetition, the academic work paradoxically stands as a bastion of the concept of the individual. Working within the definition of individual as something unique and original, one may easily envisage the academic work as a manifestation of the concept which has the notion of singularity written into its very core. The collaboration of the two factors, the academic work and the expansion, may perhaps be easiest to find in the case of the experimental sciences, particularly the areas of physics and chemistry. Yet evoking such an instance may cause a shadow mistrust to loom from the direction of the contemporary humanities over the physical sciences burdened by the prodigal affliction of the Enlightenment. Plagiarism heralds the death of knowledge, and constitutes an act where movement of revision

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<sup>4</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Culture in the Plural* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 49.

turns inwards, a gesture of procrastination for the sake of unproductive repetition. For even at the heart of Baudrillardian exhilaration with hyperreal absence of originals, the submergence into the world of the copy, lies the nagging notion of multiplicity which through its mere presence turns one's attention to the previously mentioned, subtle yet significant, difference between the concepts "production" and "creation." And it would appear proper to advocate that academic works are created rather than produced, as "creation" contains within it an innate notion of *originality*, an essential ingredient of every academic work but not necessarily a notion implied by the word "production."

Plagiarism poses a threat precisely towards creation, an event responsible for the expansion of the academic universe. Even though "creation" and "production" may be used interchangeably and may perhaps in some context be treated as synonymous nouns which describe the process of something coming into existence, "production" points towards socio-economic connotation while "creation" contains within it the trace of the metaphysical. "Production" may mean the making of a copy, while "creation" conceives the original. And it is the event of creation that must move to the foreground in the academic world of compilation and referencing.

Michel Foucault thus characterises the modern scholar:

It seems to me that what must now be taken into account in the intellectual is not the "bearer of universal values." Rather, it's the person occupying a specific position – but whose specificity is linked, in a society like ours, to the general functioning of the apparatus of truth. In other words, the intellectual has a three-fold specificity: that of his class position [...]; that of his condition of life and work, linked to his condition as an intellectual (his field of research, his place in the laboratory, the political and economic demands to which he submits or against which he rebels, in the university, the hospital, etc.); lastly the specificity of the politics of truth in our societies.<sup>5</sup>

Of particular interest in context of this article are the latter two characteristics, especially if examined in the light of Foucault's following remarks from the same text:

"Truth" is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. "Truth" is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to the effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A regime of truth.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: an Anthology*, ed. L. Cahoone (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), p. 380.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 380.

The scholar is deeply submerged into the network of power relations with his home institution, a situation which implies a great degree of potential influence of such institution over an academic. Foucault's remarks on truth being a subjective product of a system of power may lead to the conclusion that certain "axiomatic" laws of scholarly conduct are but a discursive construct of the order of academia. This inference combined with the previous remarks about the acute necessity of preserving originality suggest an employment of tools designed to forge the identity of a scholar according to the blueprint intended for the purpose of sustaining the advancement, or more preferably, the extension of the academic knowledge. The remaining part of this paper will highlight that through plagiarism policies, the universities implicitly construct the expansion of knowledge as dogmatically ethically grounded, and that those ethical tenets are implicitly written into the foundations of one's identity as a scholar and insubordination towards them ultimately leads to erasure or dissolution of that identity. As Nietzsche would say: "You shall obey – someone and for a long time: else you will perish and lose the last respect for yourself."<sup>7</sup>

An extensive study of university guidebooks available on the internet results in the possibility of distinguishing three separate groups of reasons for the necessity of avoidance of plagiarism, each one appealing to a different facet of scholarly experience. The examples presented below are the most representative of those groups, where the phrasing of the arguments leaves no doubt as to the intentions of their creator.

The first group may be seen as presenting plagiarism as an offence against the "self." It would appear that the manipulative discourse is directed at one's personal interests and it plays its persuasive role through the appeal towards one's aims, ambitions and values. The arguments presuppose a certain already existing set of prerogatives, built into one's code of behaviour as an innate part of the psyche. The following citations exemplify this reasoning.

If you plagiarise, you are cheating yourself. You don't learn to write out your thoughts in your own words, and you don't get specific feedback geared to your individual needs and skills. Plagiarising a paper is like sending a friend to practise tennis for you – you'll never score an ace yourself.<sup>8</sup>

Each of us must learn how to declare intellectual debts. Proper attribution acknowledges those debts responsibly, usefully and respectfully. Attribution is responsible when it comes at a location and in a fashion that leaves readers in no doubt about whom you are thanking for what.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, "The Natural History of Morals," in *From Modernism to Postmodernism: an Anthology*, ed. L. Cahoon (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996), p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> <http://sja.ucdavis.edu/SJA/plagiarism.html>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.nwu.edu/uacc/plagiar.html>

[...] an attribution is respectful when it expresses our appreciation for something done well enough to warrant our borrowing it. We should take pride in the intellectual company we keep. It speaks well of us that we have chosen to use the work of intelligent, interesting people, and we can take genuine pleasure in joining our name with theirs.<sup>10</sup>

The first citation appeals to the individual's desire for improvement. A student or an academic, through a thoughtless gesture of duplication, deprives himself of the possibility of inner development which, as the passage seems to imply, can only be achieved through original production and intellectual effort.

The second quote appeals to the individual's innate sense of justice, by the means of conjuring socially favoured, predominant and acknowledged values of responsibility, honour and respect. A good scholar ought to be a person of high moral and ethical standards for whom the obedience to such code of conduct is far more important than the temptation of the perspectives of ill-gotten, unfair advantage.

The third quote appeals to one's individual sense of pride and achievement. The extract lends itself towards the interpretation in which a doubtful benefit of successful deception is far outdone by the satisfaction of including VIP's of the academic world in your work, thus enlarging your ego by seeing your own name amongst the famous.

The second group of reasons for avoiding plagiarism relates to the realm of community and suggests that other scholars receive the blunt of your wrongdoings. Here, the act of plagiarism threatens the social structure of the academia and is portrayed to disturb the rules upon which this construction rests and by which it is propelled to function.

Plagiarism devalues other's original work. Submitting a professional writer's work is taking an unfair advantage over students who do their own work.<sup>11</sup>

Plagiarism is dishonest because it is an attempt to claim an undeserved credit which rightly belongs to another author. Plagiarism is an intellectual equivalent of stealing and will absolutely not be tolerated.<sup>12</sup>

Here, we find the most widely encountered response to plagiarism – an appeal for an ethical academic stance towards others. In the first instance, other student's or scholar's work pales in comparison with the seemingly effortless, and voluminous writings of high quality "produced" by the cheating party. The second case makes a stand against, once again, intuitively wrong notion of

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nwu.edu/uacc/plagiar.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://sja.ucdavis.edu/SJA/plagiarism.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://garnet.acns.fsu.edu/~msanders/plag.html>



feeding upon other's effort in order to further one's own reputation and academic position. Both of those examples upset the processes of fair academic competition and disturb the structure of the mutual exchange of knowledge essential to the advancement of scholarship.

The third group entails reasons which connect directly to the institutionalised form of academia, namely the university structure.

universities reputation affects the value of your degree; [...] dishonesty hurts (its) standing.<sup>13</sup>

Universities have several functions, including training for various vocations. But at all times they are expected to teach in a way which helps and requires students to acquire the skills of intellectual inquiry. To this end, universities are expected to assess their students to see whether this expectation had been met. By the awarding of a degree the university is guaranteeing to the public, amongst other things, that the graduate has made the grade in this respect. Where students attempt to deceive their assessor as to the level of achievement they have actually reached, this is not only immoral but puts the universities reputation at risk.<sup>14</sup>

Those two citations exemplify the final ethical argument, namely the sin of disloyalty towards the institution which raised the individual as *alma mater* and towards whom one ought to feel greatly indebted. The act of plagiarism is a gesture aimed against the parent-institution, by all means a most unethical deed.

Thus the policies on plagiarism present certain rigid models and obedience of those standards is deemed necessary for the modern academic. Proper scholarship entails therefore three distinct groups of qualities and expectations of behaviour: Firstly, high personal standards, such as constant strive for improvement, the sense of responsibility and honour and intellectual pride. Secondly, a responsibility to maintain and support the social structure of the academia, which includes the proper ethical approach of compliance with the rules of fair competition and moral obligation towards other academics. Thirdly, the expectation of loyalty towards the institutionalised form of academia that is the home university.

Those three aspects of the practice of scholarship are more than just rules of conduct; instead they actually constitute the basis, the foundation upon which each individual scholar's identity is raised. These ethical bounds, establish a universal identity-pattern, an archetypal form which functions upon three plateaux, as exemplified by the three categories described a moment ago – the

<sup>13</sup> <http://sja.ucdavis.edu/SJA/plagiarism.html>

<sup>14</sup> *Study Guide: Structure Thought and Reality* (Perth: Murdoch University Press, 1994), p. 74.

level of the “self,” the level of the “community” and the level of the “institution.” Those three aspects are exhaustive of the possible modes of functioning as an academic or even, it may be valid to say, as a human being. Any individual scholar personality/identity will be a mixture resulting from the incidents and actions occurring within those three overlapping realms. The academic guidebooks concerning plagiarism precisely set the acceptable moral standards of behaviour for each of those realms and as such transport those realms into the dimension of ethics. The identity of a scholar will thus have ethical substructure and its possible unsettling may cause the individual identity to collapse or be taken away. It is essential to stress once again, that any potential coming to being of an individual identity is heavily embedded into the moral plane and bound to function within the mechanism of constructed values for the zones of the “self,” the “community” the “institution.”

It must be noticed, therefore, that while any of the aspects of the conduct of a scholar may be broken, such an occurrence does not necessarily end one's career. Plagiarism, on the other hand, definitely and permanently discredits him/her, thus effectively removing their identity from them. For example, if an academic produces no work of value, or no work at all, he/she is simply a bad scholar. If he/she is arrogant and unpleasant towards colleagues or disloyal towards their department or university, he/she simply earns a bad reputation. In all of those cases a scholar is still able to function with more or less hindrance and is still identified with the role/image/position of an academic. Plagiarism, however, ruins in practice the whole career, bestowing brands which are impossible to get rid off.

The conclusions may be formulated as follows: through the ethical implications of the postulated justifications of the wrongs of plagiarism, the academia builds and enforces a basic identity structure of a scholar and the premises contained within that skeleton, working on the principle of opposition, promote the advancement of knowledge by arguments no other than those of strong ethical and moral reason. The statement may be illuminated from yet another angle, namely the examination of the individual identity coming into being. As it was stated previously, this process occurs according to the foundation composed of the ethical principles which govern the main plateaux. Those principles were seen as being derived from the arguments against plagiarism and plagiarism is their chief, simultaneous undoing. Now, the opposite, or should one say, the only alternative to plagiarism is original work. If plagiarism unmistakably works against the three aspects of the “self” “the community,” and “the institution” then creation of an original work, obeying the principle of opposition, is the proper mode of functioning and as such harvests merits on each respective level.

Being original means creating something new, thus sustaining the expansion of knowledge. Mere stagnation, the lack of production is still potential originality while the true enemy of uniqueness is repetition and this is precise-

ly the nature of plagiarism. One may equate here the term "repetition" with the breakage of the three identity corner-stones and at the same time equate it with the prevention of the growth or expansion of the academia. The scholar then moves within the sphere outlined by the oppositions originality/repetition and forced by the ethical arguments present within the dichotomy is always destined towards paying homage to the first of the two terms. In any other case, he/she is threatened by no less than a perspective of further inability of identification with the concept of the scholar. What results is a ceaseless development of the academia, implicitly justified and at the same time caused by the ethical measures constructed by the university policies.

The discursive practise found underlying the relationship of scholarly conduct and plagiarism may thus be summarised to entail the following mechanisms. Most importantly, university conduct rules construct the foundation of potential identity of a scholar to be raised upon proper moral attitude towards "the self," the "community," the "institution." In this context, plagiarism is the way of ultimate shattering of all of the three corner-stones and it results in a disqualification of a scholar and as such a denial of further claim to that particular identity. The identity itself can only be built and maintained through originality and creativity which benefits the academia with the circulation and expansion of knowledge. The defence against the stagnation of this progress is ultimately based upon arguments of strongly ethical nature, which are, at the same time, construed to be an integral part of the scholar's identity.

The ideology of plurality ultimately shifts the responsibility of maintaining the academic integrity to the individual scholar. Lacking a sharply defined ethos of progress, the modern academia is forced to revert to discursive practises, which direct the construction of scholar's identity in such manner that originality is an essential prerequisite of any academic work. The ironic element of this phenomenon surfaces in the fact that the pragmatic arguments employed by the universities invoke ethical values which current curriculum of many departments may call into question. The relativism of the modern humanities, stripped of the firm doctrines of Reason, Truth and Progress, and above all threatened by the previously discussed dangers, moves the "universal" ethical principles from the realm of philosophical dogma or mood of the epoch to the realm of university administration. The advancement of the academia is thus no longer *officially* motivated and protected by the discarded ideals of the Enlightenment but promoted by the network of judicial, economic and most-importantly, ethical constructs woven into the social and communal fabric of a scholar's identity.